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Trends. A Strategic Defense Initiative Against Biological Warfare: Sense? Nonsense? Mal Vu, Mal Dit?

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The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was initiated by United States (US) President Ronald Reagan during his first term. The idea was to develop and field an "umbrella" to protect against nuclear attack. At best, the umbrella had holes and could be easily torn. Costs seemed exorbitant in contrast with the protection offered. And SDI offered no protection against specific variants of attack, such as a terrorist with a mobile nuclear device within the US. However, SDI--in various disguises--still limps along and expends research and development dollars.

Does SDI targeting offensive biological warfare (BW) attack seem any more promising--with recent political concerns about Iraqi and Russian BW assets? BW is a strategic threat in terms of number of potential casualties and is conceived as a weapon of mass destruction along with chemical and nuclear assets. And at least theoretically, the attack can come via delivery systems similar to nuclear attack. However, SDI against BW would not only be subject to the same vulnerabilities as a nuclear SDI but would also harbor additional ones.

SDI against BW would probably have to constitute the following: (1) ongoing intelligence gathering, evaluation, analysis, production, and dissemination to identify threats; (2) ongoing research, development, production, stockpiling, fielding, and dispensing of vaccines based on the perceived threat; (3) ongoing research, development, production, stockpiling, fielding, and readying of dispensing systems for protective equipment and antidotes based on the perceived threat; (4) information programs to minimize the social and psychological disruption induced by the threat and employment of BW; and (5) employment of conventional weapons and even weapons of mass destruction to destroy adversary BW assets--if those assets are sufficiently distal to the locus of attack--based on the perceived threat.

Intelligence. At present, a viable BW intelligence program would need significant human intelligence resources. These resources are for the most part lacking due to language, political, social, and cultural shortfalls. Remote sensing modes of technical intelligence are less than optimal due to the small spaces and dual use assets sufficient for an offensive BW program. Vaccines and Antidotes. In the "spy-counterspy" sequences of identifying a threat, countering it, and countering the counter, the offensive BW side that can develop novel and unusually virulent strains of BW agents seemingly have the advantage. Also, in an era of "downsizing," the cost of research, development, production, stockpiling, fielding, and dispensing may be prohibitive in contrast to an existing threat until too little time remains before the attack. Moreover, the human factors problems--especially compliance--in implementing BW defenses and counters are far from resolved even based on state-of-the-art social sciences. Information Programs. As with vaccines and antidotes, state-of-the-art social sciences are not capable of handling the psychological fallout of BW threat and attack. Most sophisticated theorists in the social scientists seem to posit that such a capability is extremely unlikely. Destruction of BW Assets. As made clear in the recent crisis over Iraqi BW assets, even a massive attack against BW assets would likely not be significantly successful.

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As with the original SDI, one against BW attack initially seems reasonable but then does not survive the onslaught of reasoned analysis. The IBPP recommendation for managing existence under the BW sword of Damocles is to continually upgrade intelligence programs so that attempts at BW attack are nipped in the earliest stages possible--before the point of no return. (See Altman, L.K. (March 11, 1998). Smallpox vaccine urged to prepare for terrorist attacks. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Chairman of the Team B Study Group. (1996). <http://www.nationalsecurity.org/heritage/nationalsecurity/teamb/teambgrp.html>; Preston, R. (March 9, 1998). Annals of warfare: The bioweaponeers. *The New Yorker*, 52-65; SDI's 10th anniversary. <http://blake.oit.unc.edu/~steph/reagan/sdi10.html>; Soviet strategic defense programs. (October, 1985). <http://www.fas.org/irp/dia/product/ssdp.htm>.) (Keywords: Biological Agents, Bioweapons, Intelligence, SDI, Security, Strategic Defense Initiative, United States.)